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ABSTRACT

Migrant workers have the highest school dropout rate, larger than any other major sub-group, in the United States, and a very low rate of participation in adult basic education programs. This paper reports on an ethnographic study exploring the early schooling, education, and family support for learning in a migrant community in North Carolina. Data were gathered through informal conversations and semistructured interviews with 27 migrant farmworkers. The migrant adults interviewed presented a common perception of negative schooling experiences. Those who had tried to continue their education through traditional adult education programs had been generally unsuccessful. It was only when they were recruited by a program specifically designed for migrant adults that they were able to overcome negative perceptions and view education as a means to better employment and personal satisfaction. A model derived from the data shows two circles representing the lack of congruency between the home and school cultures. School is seen as a meaningless and painful place, incongruent with home lifestyle and values. The response to this incongruity is dropping out of school. Since learning is valued, an attempt is made to return as an adult to education, as a means of improving employability. Participation in adult basic education programs that are not grounded on knowledge of the migrant population and their cultural norms brings about the same response (negative perceptions and dropping out). A return to education was only successful when the experience was untangled from past schooling perceptions in programs specifically designed for migrant adults. This paper includes a literature review that briefly covers the characteristics of Black, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and Anglo migrants; aspects of the culture of migrancy; gender and adult-child roles; powerlessness of migrants; and attitudes toward authority. (KS)

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MIGRANT FARMWORKERS' PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOLING, LEARNING, AND EDUCATION

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to describe the context, activities, and beliefs of migrant farmworkers. I studied a Hispanic migrant community in a rural area of a Southern state in order to discover how the migrancy experience frames adults' perceptions concerning schooling, learning, and education and how these perceptions, in turn, shape participation in educational programs. The intent was to collect rich and descriptive data about the beliefs, practices, and behaviors of this group of people and from this description generate the complex interaction of factors that shape migrant farmworkers' participation in adult basic education and literacy programs

Introduction

Migrant farmworkers have been labeled the most disadvantaged of all minority groups. An invisible group to most of society, they are, by definition, families on the move with little time to establish community ties (Ford, 1988). They live in isolation even when in high-density areas. When they stop to work on local farms, they are hardly noticed by most community members (Prewitt-Diaz, Trotter, & Rivera, 1990). For the most part, their needs, problems, dreams, and aspirations are kept hidden and go unmet and unfulfilled.

Migrants are the most undereducated major sub-group in the United States. Their high school dropout rate is larger than any other group: 43 percent according to the National Council of La Raza (1990). Mobility, language, and cultural differences experienced as they move from one community to another combined with health and nutritional problems to have a negative effect on school achievement. The constant interruption of the educational process, as well as the inability of schools to understand their culture and meet their needs, lead to confusion, frustration, and a feeling of alienation among migrants. This feeling of alienation in turn becomes a major factor in the incidence of migrant students dropping out of school, according to some researchers (Brewer & Richards, 1988). Hodgkinson (1985) reports that over 70 percent of all migrants have not completed high school and 75 percent are functionally illiterate.

For the purpose of this study, migrant workers are defined as those persons who are agricultural laborers and who travel within the geographical boundaries of the

continental United States and Canada in pursuit of employment. These migrant workers move along three identifiable streams: the Eastern stream, the Mid-Continent stream, and the West Coast stream (King-Stoops, 1980). The Eastern stream is made up of Puerto Ricans, Mexican-Americans, Anglos, Canadian Indians, and Blacks, and flows mostly up and down the region east of the Appalachian mountains. The Mid-Continent stream, composed of Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, Blacks, and most recently Vietnamese and Cambodians, traces the Mississippi river basin. These migrants move in all directions to and from different regions in Texas. The West Coast stream is the largest movement, extending from California and Arizona to Oregon and Washington. This stream is comprised primarily of documented and undocumented Mexicans, Central Americans, Vietnamese, Filipinos, and other Western Pacific immigrants.

For decades the economic health of this nation has depended on steady streams of migrant workers moving through our farmland, yet we know very little about who they are, what their lives are like, or what their needs are. The migrant population has remained virtually untouched and is seldom the topic of articles or the subject of research. A search of the Adult Basic Education (ABE) literature reveals very little about the migrant adult. A recently published ethnographic study of migrant children conducted by Prewitt-Diaz, et al. (1990) suggested the existence of what they called "the culture of migrancy." As the ethnographers analyzed the data collected, a picture began to emerge of a culture that had often not been written about or studied. According to the authors, migrants come from different countries, cultures, and geographical areas but have developed common beliefs, values, norms, customs, and knowledge symbols. These behavior patterns recurred

throughout the three streams and were reported independently by the ethnographers as occurring among the people interviewed. The existence of a culture of migrancy gives boundaries to this research.

Objective of the Study

The problem my research study intended to address was the lack of information about migrant farmworkers as learners—a cultural group with the highest school dropout rate plus a very low rate of participation in Adult Basic Education programs. To address the problem, I explored their early schooling, education, and family support for learning. The study provided insight into the culture of migrancy and its impact on migrant adults' participation in ABE programs. The knowledge gained can assist in planning ABE programs that are sensitive to the cultural distinctness of this group and will respond to their particular needs. I expected that the data collected would provide enough documentation to answer the following research questions:

> *1. How does the migrancy experience frame adults' perceptions concerning schooling, learning, and education?*
>
> *2. What common beliefs, values, norms and experiences are shared by the migrant community residing at the study site?*
>
> *3. What common elements are found in the educational life histories of the main participants?*
>
> *4. What are the migrant adults' perceptions on participation in adult basic education programs?*

Methods of Investigation

Qualitative research methods are the most appropriate to the study of the culture of migrancy because they best provide a holistic view of a culture. Ethnographic methods of

data collection—the type of qualitative research methods used for this study—assist in the analytic description or reconstruction of intact cultural scenes and groups (Spradley & McCurdy, 1972). The focus of the study was a migrant community in an agricultural town of North Carolina. The community was studied using the case study strategy of research design. Case studies is the preferred strategy when "how" and "why" questions are being posed, when the researcher has little control over events, and when the focus is on contemporary phenomena within a real-life context (Yin, 1989). The form of case studies used, the community study, focuses on a neighborhood or community to gain a complete picture of a social group. Migrants as a social group have become a noticeable force in this community during the last ten years, attracting the attention of the local media and of businesses. Their visibility in the community facilitated the study. Local community members were aware of the migrants presence and were able to give me an opinion when asked.

The information used in the study came from two types of participants: the migrant farmworkers and local community members who are, by virtue of their work, in constant contact with the migrant community. During my stay at the site, I came in contact with 27 migrant farmworkers. These contacts were of different duration and at different settings. Some were informal conversations and others were semi-structured interviews. From the migrants that I met during informal conversations, nine agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews, and I asked them to be the main participants of the study. The data collected from these interviews was organized in the form of ethnographic profiles. The information collected from the local community assisted in understanding the setting.

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Social Context for the Study

The need to harvest a crop creates the demand for farmworkers. When that crop is harvested, the typical migrant worker packs up his or her family and possessions and moves on to find new work. Lacking adequate education, and without advocates to protect their rights, migrant workers accept jobs that offer no benefits other than hourly wage or by-bushel pay. Migrants are paid an average of $4.80 an hour or 40 cents for each bushel harvested (Kissam & Griffith, 1990). They do not receive retirement pension or have a hospitalization plan. They are seasonal agricultural workers who follow the crops and harvests across the United States and Canada with scarce legal protection or advocacy.

According to King-Stoops (1980), the first real migrant movement began after the Civil War when freed slaves fled north and were hired to do agricultural work. As the season changed, they would move with the crops, taking with them family and relatives. Migrancy became a way of life for them. All family members, children included, participated in the harvest. Children followed the migrant footsteps of their fathers, generation after generation.

During the decade of the 1920s, thousands of acres had to be cleared from ragweed and cockleburs in the Southwestern states. The cotton was moving west across Texas, through New Mexico and Arizona to the coast, and had to be hand-shoed and harvested. Since very few people knew how to clear these brush areas, Mexican workers were recruited. The term in Spanish used by these workers to refer to the brush country —*brasada*— eventually was used to describe those who cleared the brush: *braceros*

according to Alford (1972). Because of the closeness of the term to the Spanish word for arms, *brazos*, many have traced the origin of the noun to the word *brazos*. The origin of the word notwithstanding, the term *braceros* is often used in the literature previous to the 1960s to describe migrant workers recruited from Mexico and the Caribbean islands.

The main reason this group of agricultural workers move from farm to farm is to find work and improve their economic situation. They may have a home base to return to after the harvest or they may not. Prewitt Diaz, et al. (1990) found that, contrary to the media stereotype, most migrant workers are U.S. citizens. Undocumented workers represent only 15 percent of all migrants.(National Agricultural Worker Survey, 1989). ' Green card workers' is a term used to identify those who migrate annually from Mexico to the United States to participate in the citrus and grape harvest. The Department of Labor program is also identified by the term 'H2.A' workers. The number of green card holders varies from year to year and is controlled by the Department of Labor.

Sub-categories of Migrant Populations

Prewitt-Diaz, et al. (1990), have divided the migrant population into several subcategories by ethnic background. The early migrant farm workers on the West Coast were Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, and Mexicans. A second group was composed of blacks on the East Coast. The third group were Spanish-speaking migrants from Puerto Rico and Texas. This latter group moved into the midsection of the country. By 1966, there were migrants moving through the Eastern migrant stream from each of the ethno-linguistic groups discussed below.

Blacks

In the first decade of this century, blacks, primarily from Florida, moved to the Northeast. The predominant place of their resettlement was New York State. Later blacks from other Southern states moved to industrial centers in the North. During the 1930s, the cultivation of winter vegetables attracted black workers from other Southern states to Florida (Young, 1968). Migrant blacks became a significant part of the farm labor force in the South. Years later, this work force moved to the Northern states. The pattern continues today, although a marked decrease of black migrant workers has been noted.

Mexican-Americans

Mexican-American migrants are predominantly from Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California. The Mexican-Americans comprise the largest group of Hispanics in the United States. There are approximately 13 million Mexican-Americans. No reasonable estimate exists of the percentage of Mexican-Americans who are migrants. However, the Department of Education reports that about 60 percent of all migrant children accounted for by the educational system are Mexican-American.

Puerto Ricans

Puerto Ricans comprise the second largest Hispanic group in the United States. Their migration to the mainland began after World War II and constitutes the first airborne migration to the United States. They settled primarily in the Northeastern states, as well as in Illinois and Michigan.

Anglos

About 20 percent of migrant farmworkers are Anglo of European extraction. They are located predominantly in Northern states (e.g., Washington, Idaho, Montana, Illinois,

Pennsylvania, and Maine). This population works primarily on dairy farms or crop production farms.

The Prewitt-Diaz et al. research study (1990) does not mention Appalachian white migrants. However, the site of my research study is within the Eastern stream, which includes the Appalachian mountain area. Many natives of the Appalachian mountain area migrate through the states comprising Appalachia. The ABE program serving the migrant workers in the North Carolina community studied listed this group as targeted for services. Asian and Asian-American migrants are very common in the Western migrant stream but not common in the studied area of the Eastern migrant stream.

Although migrant workers share a lifestyle and behavioral patterns, migrant groups differ in social and educational backgrounds. While many Asian and Hispanic-American migrants have some knowledge of English, some recently arrived immigrants are not literate even in their own language. For some, illiteracy is a result of their social and economic status; for others, illiteracy stems from the disruption in education caused by recent moves or political turmoil (Prewitt-Diaz, et al, 1990). Some migrants come from areas with no written language or where there is a strong oral tradition of language learning (Khmer, Hmong, and Haitians, among other groups).

Migrancy as a Culture

A culture is broadly defined as the set of distinctive modes or ways of behaving that are shared by a group. Migrant lifestyles revolve around working, moving on to find other work, and working again. The activities involved in this process have created behavioral patterns that Prewitt-Diaz, et al. (1990) have called "the culture of migrancy." These

behavioral patterns were observed throughout the three streams and reported independently by the ethnographers as occurring among people from different ethno-cultural backgrounds (1990 p. 117). Hintz (1981) studied a community of migrant workers in Ohio and described the migrant culture as follows:

> Migrant workers have a strong sense of family loyalty; respect for elderly persons; politeness; the children do not tease or 'kid' an adult. They have pride for what they are and their heritage; maintain faith with the family and their religion. Migrant workers do not strive to obtain higher salaries and do not want more than they need. They consider their employers, and anglos generally, as 'greedy', not satisfied, always wanting more. The migrant family stands firm in its values. They feel that diplomacy and tactfulness are very important in communicating with others.
>
> They are not demanding or aggressive towards agencies or employers. They are not likely to exert violent actions politically (p. 13).

The ethnographic study by Prewitt-Diaz, et al. focused on migrant children, but in the process opened a window into migrant families and their shared behavior patterns. Some of the patterns mentioned in the Prewitt-Diaz study are described in the following paragraphs.

Gender Roles

Although differences were found along ethnic lines, in most cases, women are expected to work in the fields and do household chores. Men and children are usually exempt from household responsibilities.

Marriage at a young age is common for migrants and is even more prevalent among female migrants. For most migrants, especially females, marriage signals the end of schooling. A few young men stay in school; women commonly do not. With marriage comes the assumption of adult roles for both sexes. In most migrant families, enormous pressure exists for the males to support the family and for females to have children. These

complementary roles help young migrant couples to survive but severely limit the chances for educational success and advancement.

Adult/Child Roles

Although all cultures differentiate between adult roles and children's behavior, the age at which children begin to adopt adult roles is different for different cultures. In many migrant families, boys begin to be treated as adults when, at age fifteen or sixteen, they can earn as much in the fields as their fathers. Girls start being treated as adults when they are capable of having children and managing a household. The difference between the role expectations of migrant families and those of the dominant society has serious consequences for educational programs. Most migrant children drop out of school when they are able to work in the fields and earn money. Migrant parents allow their children to make the decision between dropping out of or staying in school.

Dealing with Social Institutions

Educational, health care, and social service agencies are created to facilitate living in a complex society. One of the functions of culture is to teach how to best use the system of agencies. Migrants, especially those who come from a different linguistic and cultural background, are at a serious disadvantage because they do not understand the system. Some migrants strive to be independent and take pride in meeting their family needs; others suffer in silence because they do not know who could help them in times of trouble.

Powerlessness and the Migrant Cycle

The cycle of migrancy is very hard to break, and many migrants feel trapped with little hope for a better future for their children. This feeling of powerlessness is sometimes

misinterpreted as apathy by educational agencies. Although migrant parents express support for education for their children, they also feel that migrancy is the fate for them regardless of anything they say or do.

Attitude Toward Authority

Migrants have a generally positive attitude toward authority, especially toward the schools. However, this attitude is occasionally expressed in a way that is culturally confusing to school personnel. Migrants trust the schools to know what is right for their children and feel that their questions about the appropriateness of their children's educational program will be construed as a challenge to the teacher's authority and prestige. The institution with which migrants most often interact is the school; paradoxically, the migrant lifestyle is the greatest impediment to their children's educational success.

Summary of Findings

The migrant adults interviewed at the site presented a common perception of negative schooling experiences. The constant moving from one place to another, the pressures to fit in, to conform, and to meet expectations proved to be a heavy burden. Nowhere in their stories could I find efforts made by the schools to help these young adults to adjust. Many had to repeat grades and were left behind by age peers. Even those who were not turned off by school did not find the right atmosphere to discuss home problems. Others expressed open resentment for the insensitivity of teachers and administrators. When talking about school, the migrants adults profiled were able to remember only pain, rejection, and isolation. These feelings facilitated the decision to quit school before

completing high school requirements. Although all of the migrants profiled and most of the study participants were school dropouts, they were active learners. When asked about learning experiences since leaving school, all had much to tell. Some talked about street learning; others showed pride in learning skills on their own; while others told about their experiences in adult education programs.

Eight of the nine migrant adults profiled tried to continue their education through adult education programs. It seemed that their initial contact with traditional ABE/GED programs was affected by the negative perceptions of schooling. Five enrolled in adult education programs and quit after a few weeks. They felt again like children trying to fit into a system. It was only when they were recruited by a program specially designed for migrant adults that they were able to overcome these perceptions and view education as a means to better employment and personal satisfaction. All but one completed high school requirements once they found the appropriate program.

All the migrant adults profiled provided vivid and glowing comments about their belief in the value of education for themselves and their children. Despite the fact that their parents had little schooling and they themselves had not completed high school, most parents wanted their children to finish school. Even a female participant who supported her daughter when she decided to drop out of school, talked about the importance education had for her and quickly encouraged her daughter to enroll in the GED program.

The term education is used many times to indicate formal learning. When I used the term education to refer to formal schooling, the response of several of the participants was as follows: *You are educated at home; in school you learn to acquire and channel*

knowledge. I had used a literal translation of the term in Spanish and it had a different connotation for older Hispanic migrants. They defined the Spanish term *educación* as the teaching of manners and morals by parents and relatives. When I talked to them, I had to make a distinction between formal learning and *educación* . Now I wonder how much confusion the different usage of the term must have created for earlier generations of Hispanic migrants dealing with the anglo school system. Once I clarified the term, all the study participants expressed concern about their present employment situation and how they value education as the only means to get out of farmwork and poverty.

Perceptions are mental images we form based on our daily experiences. They are the lenses through which we see the world. These lenses shape how we interpret the world and, once formed in our mind, shape the way we behave. While discussing the data collected for the study with colleagues and research participants, a model developed from the data that assisted me in understanding the migrant perceptions emerging from the ethnographic profiles.

The Migrant Adults and Schooling, Learning and Education Model (figure #1) represents a graphic representation of the model. The first two circles represent the lack of congruency between the home and school cultures. School is seen as a meaningless and painful place, incongruent with home lifestyle and values. The response to the process of internalizing this lack of congruency is dropping out of school. Schooling seems no longer valid for achieving a better future. Since learning is valued, an attempt is made to return as an adult to education, as a means of improving employability. Attempts to participate in adult basic education programs which are not grounded on the knowledge of the population

bring about the same response. An attempt to return to education was only successful when the experience was untangled from past schooling perceptions. This happened when the program attended was specially designed for migrant adults.

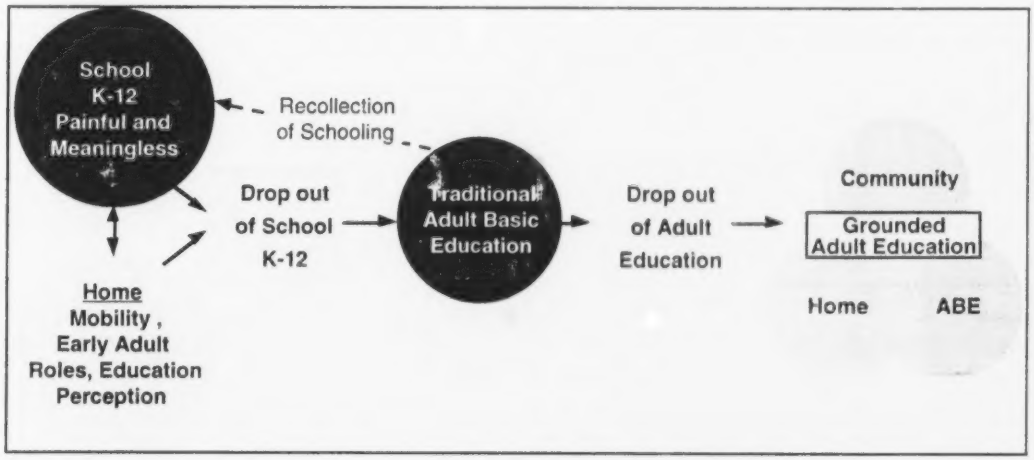

Figure1: Migrant Adults and Schooling, Learning, and Education Model

Recommendations

The migrant group I studied deals daily with a variety of situations related to their status in the local community. Concerns such as where to shop; where to look for housing; how to behave when outside the migrant circle of friends; where to look for jobs; what school to enroll their children; how to behave when dealing with social agencies, local police, and school authorities. Adult education for them cannot be divorced from wider socioeconomic dimensions of unemployment or underemployment, political power, and equal opportunity. Acculturation is the process by which individuals move from one socio-cultural setting to another and acquire the norms of another culture. This process can be dysfunctional for Hispanics if the discontinuity between their culture and the mainstream

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society are not effectively bridged through functional education (Montero-Sieburth, 1990). To effectively meet the needs of marginalized groups, adult basic education must be holistic and address the totality of needs brought to the learning setting.

Successful basic education programs for migrant farmworkers must have the following characteristics:

*Espouse a humanistic, interpersonal, and dialogic philosophy;

*Have an open and supportive environment;

*Have community visibility;

*Have a strong network of community resources;

*Classes are flexible, adults are involved in their own learning;

*Teachers act as facilitators, counselors, and managers. They are proficient in Spanish and English and knowledgeable of the community and cultural norms;

*Instructional strategies were based on group dialogue, personal interaction, active participation, appropriate materials, and an integrated curriculum, integrating basic skills, with personal and community development.

The High School Equivalency Program (HEP), a federally funded GED preparation program, helped many of the research participants by establishing a continuum of services to provide assistance beyond GED preparation. Yet the local migrant community still sees the need for services and programs beyond the scope of HEP funding. The "real need", according to the study participants, is for a comprehensive adult education center that meet migrant adults' vocational education, basic skills, and cultural needs.

It is my hope that this study will serve as base for further research and programmatic activities to benefit the migrant population and reduce the conditions that keep them marginalized and invisible. Many ABE and GED preparation programs such as HEP are serving migrant adults and other cultural groups, but their scope is limited and

retention rates are low. Accountability, as defined by the funding agency, is measured by the number of students passing the GED and not by improvement in the quality of life of its participants.

Many migrant adults enroll in GED preparation programs trying to increase their employability but leave without taking the GED test because of household and family needs. For many others, the pressing need is not taking and passing a test but for becoming empowered to deal with personal and societal problems. The study I conducted among this migrant community leads me to believe that the design and delivery of adult basic education programs that are sensitive to the needs of a culturally diverse population must be based on ethnographic research studies of each of the cultures served, must be driven by transforming and empowering goals, and their success measured by the improvement in the quality of life of its participants.

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